

## Chapter 5

### Letters Regarding Christians

#### Pliny the Younger and Trajan

112 CE

Despite a general attitude that Christians were an unsavory lot and deserved whatever sanctions were laid upon them, before the middle of the third century the Roman state was reluctant to persecute Christians too vigorously. The following exchange of letters around the year 112 between Pliny the Younger (61/62-114), imperial deputy in Bithynia and Pontus, provinces that stretched along the Black Sea coast of Anatolia, and Emperor Trajan (r. 98-117) reveals the empire's attitude and policy toward Christians during the second-century *Pax Romana*, or Roman Peace.

#### Questions for Analysis

1. What is Pliny's quandary regarding Christians? What does this confusion on the part of one of the empire's chief administrators suggest about early-second-century notions about these Christians?
2. As far as Pliny was concerned, what were the unquestionable errors and dangers of Christianity and similar cults? What does your answer suggest about second-century Roman attitudes and realities?
3. What procedures did Pliny follow when Christians were brought before him? What does this suggest about Roman attitudes toward cults such as Christianity?
4. What do Pliny's policies suggest about the legal differences between citizens and non-citizens?
5. What does Pliny's report tell us about early Christian practices?
6. What does Trajan's reply allow us to infer about second-century attitudes, imperial policies, and realities?

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#### *Pliny to Emperor Trajan:*

It is my inviolable rule, my Lord, to refer all uncertain matters to you. For who is better able to guide my uncertainty or instruct me in my ignorance?

I never was present at the trials of Christians. Therefore, I am unacquainted with what is customary as to the method and extent of punishing and examining them. I am more than just a little uncertain on several points: Whether any discrimination is made for age; whether the weak are treated differently from the stronger; whether repentance earns a pardon; or whether, if someone was ever a Christian, his ceasing to be one does not gain him anything; whether the very name [of Christian] itself is punishable, even when it is not associated with any crimes; or whether crimes, which are associated with the name, are the punishable offenses.

Meanwhile, I have followed this procedure in regard to those who were brought before me as Christians. I interrogated them as to whether they were Christians. If they confessed, I asked a second and a third time,<sup>1</sup> adding the threat of capital punishment. If they persevered, I ordered them executed. For I did not doubt that, whatever it might be that they believed, certainly their stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy merited punishment. There were others of similar madness, who, because they were Roman citizens, I directed to be remanded to the City.<sup>2</sup>

Soon, as is usually the case, accusations multiplied, simply because the matter was being investigated, and more forms of this phenomenon cropped up. An unsigned placard containing many

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<sup>1</sup> Roman law required that a confession unsupported by external evidence had to be repeated in order for a person to be found guilty.

<sup>2</sup> They were sent to Rome, where they would be tried in an imperial court as citizens.

1 names was put up. I thought it appropriate to dismiss those who denied they were or ever had been  
2 Christians, who repeated after me an invocation to the gods, who made supplication to Your statue with  
3 incense and wine, which I had ordered to be brought forward for that purpose, along with images of the  
4 gods, and who, furthermore, cursed Christ. For it is said that not one of these is an act that those who are  
5 truly Christians can be compelled to perform. Others who were named by the informer said they were  
6 Christians and afterwards denied it. In fact, they had been, but had forsaken it – some three years ago,  
7 others many years ago, a few even twenty-five years ago. They all venerated your statue and the images  
8 of the gods and cursed Christ.

9 They continued to affirm, moreover, that the sum total of their guilt or error was that they were in  
10 the habit of meeting before dawn on a certain fixed day of the week and to sing in alternating verses a  
11 hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by sacred oath not to commit any impious action but  
12 that they would never perpetrate fraud, theft, or adultery nor would they bear false witness or, when called  
13 upon, refuse to deliver up anything entrusted to them. After this was over, they customarily dispersed and  
14 then reassembled to partake of food, but food of a common and innocent sort.<sup>3</sup> They had even ceased  
15 doing this after my edict was published in which, following your orders, I had forbidden secret  
16 associations. Given this, I believed it to be all the more necessary, in order to extract the truth, to question  
17 under torture two female slaves, who were called deaconesses.<sup>4</sup> I discovered, however, nothing more than  
18 a depraved and excessive superstition.

19 Consequently I suspended the proceedings and hastened to consult You. For the matter seemed to  
20 me well worth consultation, especially in light of the numbers at peril. For many of every age and rank,  
21 and even of both sexes, are and will be called into peril. For the contagion of this superstition has not only  
22 spread through the cities but even through villages and rural districts. It does, however, seem possible to  
23 contain and cure it. It is quite clear that the temples, which had been up to now almost deserted, have  
24 begun to be frequented, that the sacred festivals, after a long intermission, have been restored, and far and  
25 wide sacrificial victims,<sup>5</sup> which up until now very rarely had a buyer, are sold. From this it is easy to  
26 judge what multitude of people might be set right, if there is room for repentance.

### 27 *Trajan to Pliny*

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29  
30 You have acted properly, my dear Secundus,<sup>6</sup> in your handling of the cases of those denounced to  
31 you as Christians. For there is no general rule that can be set down as if it were a fixed standard for every  
32 case.<sup>7</sup> These people should not be sought out. If they are charged and convicted, they must be punished.  
33 Yet if someone denies being a Christian and provides proof in this matter, namely by praying to our gods,  
34 however much he might have been under suspicion in the past, he shall secure pardon by virtue of his  
35 repentance. Anonymous accusations have no place in a criminal proceeding. They are exceedingly bad  
36 precedents and do not conform to the standards of our age.

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<sup>3</sup> A source by Tertullian, for example, says Christians were accused of murdering and eating babies – uncommon and not-so-innocent food that many ascribed to Christians. The ceremony alluded to here is the *agape*, or love, feast – a communal meal in commemoration of Jesus' Last Supper with his apostles.

<sup>4</sup> Deaconesses and their male counterparts, deacons, were assistants to the presbyters (elders) who supervised the various churches. The duties of these assistants consisted of baptizing, preaching, and dispensing charity.

<sup>5</sup> Cattle and other sacrificial animals.

<sup>6</sup> Pliny's full name was Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus

<sup>7</sup> Trajan avoids laying down an imperial rescript that would have the force of law throughout the empire. Rather, he offers Pliny practical advice for the situation at hand in these two provinces.